

BEEMAN, REBA KATHERINE, M.A. *Inhabiting a Broken Body: Female Agency in the Middle Ages*. (2018)  
Directed by Dr. Amy Vines. 31 pp.

It is a common assertion in medieval studies that a woman's religious experience was tested through the body by means of torture. Scholars, such as Elizabeth Robertson and Catherine Innes-Parker, analyze saints' lives by focusing on the corporeal nature of the narrative: sexuality, physical torture, and death. Perhaps the focus on the torture and the death and its aftermath is because the authors of these texts seem to afford little time between the final breaking of the body and the woman's subsequent death. Little focus is placed on the specific effects of the inflicted torture. However, I claim that it is during the period where a woman inhabits a broken body that she holds the most cultural agency. Across a variety of medieval texts, women enter a different social space when inhabiting a broken body which allows them to acquire agency over their own lives and influence others. This paper argues that these women experience so little time inhabiting their broken body because of the potentially threatening power the specific inhabitation affords them. The important "broken body" stage appears not only in the narratives of female saints like Margaret, whose story will be analyzed within this essay, but also the wife from Marie de France's *Bisclavret* and Cresseid in Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. In all of these narratives, when the physical body has been destroyed or tortured women are free from the contractual marrying of their bodies and their place in society. Ultimately, this essay highlights the importance of the broken female body as it further others women to the point that they no longer operate within traditional medieval gender roles.

BEEMAN, REBA KATHERINE, M.A. Murderous Mothers: Implications of Filicide in Medieval Literature. (2018)  
Directed by Dr. Amy Vines. 35 pp.

During the Middle Ages women were primarily marked by their sexual and marital status—virgins, wives, widows, and mothers. Having children was central to a woman's identity. However, as in any time, motherhood was complex and one woman's maternal experience was defined by various factors such as class, race, religion, and culture. The centrality of motherhood helped perpetuate the masculine hegemony as women were expected to be submissive to their husbands and producing male heirs maintained patriarchal succession. However, there are instances of women destroying their maternal marker by committing filicide. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* the sultanness kills her son and Tristram's step-mother poisons her child in *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. These works portray these women as evil and deserving punishment. However, in the Norse *Saga of the Volsungs* both Signy and Gudrun kill their sons as a way to avenge their biological families. These women are not viewed as villains and Gudrun is even considered to be one of the most popular female characters in medieval Norse literature. I argue that the reason these women are portrayed very differently is because of their respective cultures and, namely, their differently religions. The English, as Christians view mothers very differently than the Norse, whose pagan roots were only a couple hundred years behind them. Further, Scandinavian laws and understanding of murder varied drastically from the English. These historical and cultural differences provide a foundation for a comparative analysis of these four texts and explains the different treatment of these women.

INHABITING A BROKEN BODY: FEMALE AGENCY IN THE MIDDLE AGES  
AND  
MURDEROUS MOTHERS: IMPLICATIONS OF FILICIDE IN MEDIEVAL  
LITERATURE

by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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## INHABITING A BROKEN BODY: FEMALE AGENCY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

It is a common assertion in medieval studies that a woman's religious experience is directly correlated to the body.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even conventional methods of labeling women within medieval sources are expressed in terms of physicality: they were almost always categorized as mothers and virgins<sup>2</sup>. Being labeled a mother denotes that a woman has not only had sex, but has undergone the physical experience of giving birth to a child. In contrast, virgins are defined by abstaining from the physical act of sex. A woman's place within religion was also defined by her body. According to early church fathers, the best Christian women were virgins.<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that men were not encouraged to remain chaste as well; however, their virginity was not all that defined them.

Because women were corporeally defined, they were punished and tested through their bodies. When women sinned in literature, we see physical repercussions in the fragmentation of bodies. Physical deformities or illnesses like leprosy denoted that a woman was sinful or had participated in licentious activities.<sup>4</sup> However, a woman's sin

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<sup>1</sup> For example: *Women in Christian Tradition* by George H. Tavad; *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* edited by Rosemary Radford; *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature from Twelfth Century to Dante* by Joan M. Ferrante; *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* by Caroline Walker Bynum; and "The Corporeality of Female Sanctity in *The Life of Saint Margaret*" by Elizabeth Robertson

<sup>2</sup> See *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* edited by Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (xiii and XV)

<sup>3</sup> See *Women in Christian Traditions* Tavad (73, 81, 100, and 117)

<sup>4</sup> See *Sex, Dissidence, and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*, "Lepers", 159-160, by Jeffrey Richards

was normally linked with her sexual behavior and therefore her body. A woman's religious beliefs were tested through the body, mainly by means of torture. Female saints were tortured by their oppressors who tried to break their religious conviction. After the destruction of their bodies, regardless of whether the corpus of these women was broken as a punishment or a test, they enter into a new state—that of a broken body.

I am terming the broken body as the physical state that women experience after their bodies (and by extension their female beauty) is attacked and deliberately taken away, but before these female characters either die or leave the narrative completely. Although torture is often used to break a woman's body, it is by no means the only way in which a body can be purposefully damaged. I see the broken body functioning on three levels: Firstly, physical: the body must go through some form of physical destruction; the most likely targets of the attack are the parts of a woman's body most often fetishized for their beauty, such as the skin, the breasts, the hair, the face, etc. Second, the character who inhabits the damaged corpus then experiences a shift away from the medieval conceptions of feminine gender roles and move toward acting against the masculine hegemony by subverting the cultural expectations of women—they are no longer submissive to men and they undermine the male-centered legal system. And third, there is a temporal element to their broken body state: in all of the examples that I am analyzing, a woman either dies or is removed from the narrative shortly after her body is deformed; however, even after her death, she still affects her surrounding environment. Since women in medieval texts were defined by their body and physical appearance, the

destruction of that gendered marker makes the centrality of the female form problematic and therefore causes a change in the normative binary of male/female.

Just what do these women become after the breaking of their bodies? If the binary is undermined, what—if any—new subject position do the women occupy? Sara Salih suggests that virgin martyrs comprise a third gender in her excellent essay “Performing Virginitude: Sex and Violence in the Katherine Group.” She states: “These martyrs are women who, through the practice of virginity, successfully redefine their bodies and identities as not feminine but virgin.”<sup>1</sup> However helpful it may be, Salih’s definition is based on how these women operate as virgin *before* their torture takes place and is predicated upon the saints choosing to remain chaste even after torture. My concept of the broken body, on the other hand, focuses on the results of the physical act of harm that women (both virgins and wives) are forced to experience, and it is a state from which a woman can never be released until death. While Salih give us room to talk about a gendered status beyond the binary, I am not ascribing the broken body as a third gender. My focus is not on creating a new embodied gender, but understanding how a broken female form can open that body up to do different work, such as taking control over their futures legally and physically, and also performing mass conversions.

Although it does not constitute a separate gender, the broken state does cause a rift in gender normativity. The main point of contention between women who fit into the medieval stereotypical idea of the feminine and the broken bodied women I discuss in

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Salih, “Performing Virginitude: Sex and Violence in the Katherine Group,”



this project, is their physicality and, by extension, their beauty. Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken explain that female beauty functions as the visible signifier of noble qualities such as wealth, power, birth, and courtly accomplishments.<sup>2</sup> If women in the Middle Ages were so defined by their physicality, would they still have been considered women if their bodies became fragmented? Therefore, the distinction that the broken body blurs is that of woman and not-woman. By removing their connection with the feminine, these women are able to operate in ways not traditionally available to women.

Even though most scholars, such as Salih and Elizabeth Robertson<sup>3</sup>, focus on the virgin saint's lives in the context of the destruction of the female body, saints are not the only women who have their bodies destroyed—wives also experience physical destruction. These wives are not normally placed in conjunction with one another: the wife from Marie de France's *Bisclavret* and the title character from Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*. Also, wives and saints, like Saint Margaret, are also not grouped together, but all three of the aforementioned women inhabit a body that lacks structural and gendered integrity in some way before the conclusion of their narratives: Margaret has lost the portions of her body that were sexually fetishized, Bisclavret's wife is noseless, Cresseid is physically disfigured by leprosy. After their bodies are no longer considered whole and feminine by medieval society, these women are now free to engage in acts of societal change. For instance, Bisclavret's wife removes herself from the constraints of the law by not returning to her first husband and creating her own positive

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<sup>2</sup> Kinoshita and McCracken. *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, 2012, p.60.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, "The Corporeality of Female Sanctity."

ending. Likewise, after Cresseid contracts leprosy, she takes ownership over her own body by writing her will, which is possible because she is no longer an object of male gaze. Similarly, after Margaret's body is tortured, she converts many people and undermines the masculine authority of Olibrius. Because of their physical brokenness, I argue, these women are all able to break free from societal expectations of female beauty and perform acts that operate outside of traditional medieval gender roles. While these three texts are rarely studied together, what connects them is the physical deterioration of the female body. By reconsidering the nature of a woman with a deformed body, we must reexamine how we view disability in medieval texts. Instead of a debilitating condition, we can read these destroyed bodies as empowering.

By the end of the narrative, the wife in Marie de France's *Bisclavret* inhabits a broken body. First, I would like to offer an alternative reading to how most scholars conceive of Bisclavret's wife. I am asking that we read the wife, not as a one-dimensional villain who is meant to be punished at the end of the narrative, but as a complex character. I am working against the analysis of scholars such as Carl Grey Martin and Renee L. Curtis who read the wife as an adulterous villain who conspires against her husband, asserting that the wife should not have recruited the knight to trap her husband in wolf form and therefore, she is worthy of punishment. However, what if the wife's actions were justified? The wife had no romantic feelings for the knight and therefore she is not acting out of a selfish desire.

Marie de France's *Bisclavret* opens with a happy marriage. Both husband and wife love each other, and the wife is described as an admirable woman (Marie 21-23). However, after the wife discovers that her husband is in fact a werewolf, she is horrified, and plots to trap him in his wolf form. Humans' relationship with wolves during the Middle Ages was one of negativity and fear. The fear and loathing of wolves is reflected in bestiaries of the time; the Aberdeen Bestiary, for example, explains that wolves were thought to cause men to lose the ability to speak. The bestiary also connects the wolf with the devil: "Lupi figuram diabolus portat,\ qui semper humano generi invidet, ac iugiter circuit caulas\ ecclesie fidelium, ut mactet et perdat eorum animas" [The Devil has the nature of a wolf; he always looks with an evil eye upon mankind and continually circles the sheepfold of the faithful of the Church, to ruin and destroy their souls.]<sup>4</sup> (f.17r). Because of the bestiary, we can assume a hybrid of a wolf and a human would have been met with similar fear and distrust in this period. Marie de France's *Bisclavret* certainly opens with the same sentiments:

Garulf, ceo est beste salvage;  
 tant cum il est en cele rage,  
 humes devure, grant mal fait,  
 es granz forez converse e vait. (9-12)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Aberdeen University Library MS 24, translation from Aberdeen University Library. Morton Gauld and Colin McLaren, both consultants for the transcription and translation

<sup>5</sup> A werewolf is a savage beast;  
 while his fury is on him  
 he eats men, does much harm,  
 goes deep in the forest to live. (9-12)

\*Translation and all subsequent translations taken from Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, *The Labyrinth Press*, 1978.

Although she invokes the traditional horror posed by a werewolf, as the poem progresses, Marie defies these stigmas with her characterization of Bisclavret. Carl Grey Martin states, “Wary of generic commonplaces, Marie refuses to tell a tale according to the conventions of ferocity, duplicity, and carnage that adumbrate lupine” (Martin 27). Rather, Marie offers us a werewolf that still retains his human sense in his wolf form and serves as the heroic protagonist of this story. When Bisclavret’s wife traps him in his wolf form, the position of villainy shifts from the werewolf to his wife.

Working with Martin’s assumption that Marie shies away from generic conventions, then we should not simply assume that the wife’s actions are villainous, although most scholars view the character as such. For example, Martin states: “After badgering her husband into revealing that he is a werewolf, she adulterously conspires with a hapless admirer to prevent the creature from ever regaining its human form” (23). Martin places the wife in a very negative context and sums up her actions as “adulterous” and therefore simply intends to be rid of her husband and marry another man. Similarly, Renee L. Curtis argues that the wife could have simply gone off with the knight who she employs to steal her husband’s clothes, and no one would have blamed her for leaving her husband who was often absent. Curtis explains: “Her calculated cruelty and utter selfishness are all the more abhorrent because she could have taken other less ruthless measures to obtain her freedom” (29). Curtis, though she acknowledges the wife’s logical desire to leave her husband, aligns the wife with the villainous because she traps her husband in his lycanthropic state. However, I argue against these assertions that the

wife is simply the villain of the story. It is important to rectify the wife's proposed villainous status because if she were merely a villain, her experiences become ingrained with the villain's story arc, a person who must be punished at the end of the narrative, and her powerful moves within the story become lost.

To understand Bisclavret's wife as anything other than a villain, we must reconsider the true reason she leaves her husband. Throughout their marriage, she was loyal to her husband; as for the knight she runs away with, "ele ne l'aveit unc amé / ne de s'amur aseüré," [She'd never loved him at all, / nor pledged love to him] (Marie 107-108). It is only after the knowledge of her husband's hybrid nature that she turns her affections toward the knight. This timeline undermines Martin's claim that the wife was acting out of an adulterous desire. Furthermore, as I have explained above, a person in the Middle Ages would have been afraid of the threat that wolves and werewolves posed. We can be more sympathetic to her plight by showing that that same fear was instilled in Bisclavret's wife: "La dame oï cele merveille,/de poür fu tute vermeille." [The lady heard this wonder/and turned scarlet from fear] (Marie 97-98). Even before she learns of her husband's lycanthropy, she expresses her fear of her husband:

'Sire', fait el, 'bealz, dulz amis,  
une chose vus demandasse  
mult volentiers, se jeo osasse;  
mes jeo criem tant vostre curut  
que nule rien tant ne redut.' (32-36)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "My lord," she said, "and dear love,  
I'd very much like to ask you one thing—  
if I dared;  
but I'm so afraid of your anger

It is clear that she had reason to fear her husband before his confession and even more so after she learns that he is a werewolf. Because of this fear, the wife traps her husband by enlisting the help and protection of another man.

The law in England during the Middle Ages would not have allowed her to simply leave her husband in his human state. In *Bigamy and Christian Identity in Late Medieval Champagne* Sara McDougall explains that women found guilty of bigamy were punished by way of fines or even jail time (72). Subsequently, and perhaps more importantly, if a woman's first husband was found still living, she would be forced to return to him (74). I have discussed that Bisclavret's wife would not have wanted to remain with her husband because of the stigmatization of werewolfism, so, she finds a way to eradicate her husband's human identity and enters a relationship in which she feels safe. It is only after a long search for Bisclavret that the wife is free to marry the knight. If Bisclavret had been present to contest his wife's second marriage, she would have continued to be bound to him, as McDougall explains. Therefore, the wife had to trap her husband and this negates Curtis' argument that the wife could have simply left Bisclavret. These positions shift the wife from the villain to a woman concerned with her own self-preservation. Preserving her good character is important because this disestablishes the typical trope that the wife is a one-dimensional villain who is simply meant to be punished.

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that nothing frightens me more." (32-36)

At the end of the tale, the wife is tortured into telling the court of her transgressions against her husband and Bisclavret bites her nose off. Her person attacked and her face disfigured, the wife now occupies a broken body which allows for greater personal agency. After the torture and disfigurement, very little is said about the wife save:

Cil s'en ala ensemble od li,  
pur qui sun seignur ot traï.  
Enfanz en a asez eüz,  
puis unt esté bien cuneüz  
e del semblant e del visage:  
plusurs des femmes del lignage,  
c'est veritez, sez nes sunt nees  
e si viveient esnasees. (Marie 307-314)<sup>7</sup>

Marie's quick dismissal of the wife's character reads like a symbolic death as she is exiled and then removed from the text. However, if we were to postulate about the wife's existence beyond the text, she appears to have created a successful life for herself. The life that she leads at the end of the narrative does not appear to be an unhappy one. Even after she marries the knight, the wife still would have lived in fear of the return of her wolf husband. By inhabiting a broken body, however, she is relieved of that fear; the wife undermines the legal system and does not have to return to her husband. I argue that

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<sup>7</sup> She went into exile with the knight  
with whom she had betrayed her lord.  
She had several children  
who were widely known  
for their appearance:  
several women of the family  
were actually born without noses,  
and lived out their lives noseless. (307-314)

she is able to outmaneuvers the law because she is no longer performing the medieval construction of feminine due to her new physical state.

It is interesting to note that the wife has no children with Bisclavret, but also, it is only after she inhabits a broken body that she gives birth. Although we cannot go so far as to say the wife is more fulfilled in her new life, her second marriage is certainly, by medieval standards, more productive and fruitful. Though the court viewed her as treacherous, the wife still achieves a happy ending. In the character of Bisclavret's wife we see how the mutilated body works to free a woman character from the bonds of legal and societal expectations. The wife defies her cultural gendered status by manipulating the law and remaining with the man of her choosing rather than returning to her husband. Although she experiences a symbolic death with her removal from the narrative, the wife's body continues to be productive after this "death" through her new marriage and the children that are born in this relationship.

Like Bisclavret's wife, Henryson's Cresseid also occupies a broken body as punishment and goes on to separate herself from unhealthy relationships with men and undermine the legal system. Before she undergoes this transformation, Cresseid's only real worth is defined by her beauty. She is constantly referred to as "fair". She is also described as "the flowers and paragon/Of Troy and Greece" (Stearns 79-80). Because of this correlation between a woman's beauty and her societal worth, Cresseid is read as merely an object within the masculine- dominated narrative. After her separation from Troilus, Cresseid begins a relationship with Diomedes who eventually "send to hir ane



lybell of repudie / And hir excludit fra his companie” [Sent to Cresseid his own divorce decree/And thus he banned her from his company]<sup>8</sup> (Henryson 75-76). Henryson notes that the reason for this divorce is because “Upon ane uther he [Diomedes] set his haille delyte” [Upon another he set his whole delight] (Henryson 73). Because Diomedes left Cresseid for another woman—one perhaps even more beautiful than Cresseid herself—Henryson asserts that women can never be secure in their place in society if their positions are defined by subjective and fleeting physical traits.

Cresseid is continually defined by her beauty and her relationships with men—her father, her husbands, and the men with whom she has sex after her separation from Diomedes. After her divorce, Cresseid becomes destitute and “strumpet-like” and she is judged by her peers for her actions:

Than desolait scho walkit up and down,  
 And sum men sayis into the court commoun.  
 O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se  
 Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait  
 To change in filth all thy feminitie,  
 And be with fleschlike lust sa maculait,  
 And go amang the Greikis air and lait,  
 Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance!  
 I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!  
 Yit nevertheles, quhat ever men deme or say  
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes. (Henryson 76-87)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> translation and all subsequent translations are taken from Marshall Winslow Stearns' *A Modernization of Robert Henryson's Testament of Cresseid*, Indiana University, 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Then desolate, she wandered up and down,  
 And some men sat turned woman of the town.  
 O fair Cresseid, the flower and paragon  
 Of Troy and Greece, compelled by evil fate  
 To drop thy virtue and such filth to don,  
 And be with fleshy lust so maculate,

These judgements align Cresseid with negative connotations of medieval femininity—licentiousness. This also shows how dependent a woman was on men because of the legal system. After her divorce, Cresseid was destitute. Any rights that she may have had before her divorce were taken away. In her article “Land, Lepers, and the Law in *The Testament of Cresseid*” Jana Mathews explains that “a woman typically lost the legal rights of ownership over her property, land, and moveable goods upon her divorce” (Mathews 59). However, once Cresseid contracts leprosy, this narrative changes and Cresseid takes agency over her own body and her property.

Due to her anger over her situation in life, Cresseid blasphemes the gods and they punish her with leprosy. When dealing out their punishment, the gods emphasize the destruction of her physical body. Saturn declares: “Thy greit fairnes and all thy bewtie gay, / Thy wantoun blude, and eik thy goldin hair / Heir I exclude fra the for evermair” [‘Thy great fairness and all thy beauty gay,/Thy wanton blood, and e’en thy golden hair,/Are banished evermore’] (Henryson 313-315). Similarly, Cynthia pronounces:

Thy cristall ene mingit with blude I mak,  
Thy voice sa cleir unplesand, hoir, and hace,  
Thy lustie lyre ovirspreid with spottis blak,  
And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face (Henryson 337-340).<sup>10</sup>

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So strumpet-like taking thy foul delight!  
I grieve that thou shouldst suffer such a plight.  
Yet nevertheless, whatever men deem or say  
In scornful language of thy wantonness,  
I shall defend as I may, (76-86)

<sup>10</sup> Thy crystal eye with blood shall mingled be,  
Thy voice so clear, be rough and hoarse apace,  
Thy skin with blotches black spread loathsomely,  
With livid lumps appearing on thy face. (337-340)

Indeed, this description of leprosy was historically accurate. Leprosy presented in two forms: high or low resistance. Jeffery Richards explains in *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*:

Low resistance leprosy is characterized by lumps and patches on the skin, which develop into sores; damage to the eyes, resulting in blindness; hoarseness of the voice as the throat is affected. High resistance means that the skin is not seriously disfigured but the nervous system is damaged, muscles are paralyzed and feeling is lost. Limbs become deformed and the mutilation of fingers and toes frequently occurs. (Richards 150)

According to Cynthia's curse, Cresseid suffers from low resistance leprosy which causes more physical deformities throughout the course of the disease. Certainly, of all the punishments the gods could have inflicted on Cresseid, this disease materialized on the body externally, stripping Cresseid of her feminine beauty. Although she suffers from a debilitating, socially alienating disease, because Cresseid is no longer defined by her physical beauty, she is free to operate within a new social space. Specifically, she now exists as a leper and this redefines her social standing in an ironically constructive way.

Lepers operate as a marginal group within the larger society, but more than that, they are no longer recognized as living people with full social rights as they undergo a symbolic death. Mathews explains:

Soon after his diagnosis, the leper was led to the local church, where he was encouraged to participate in a final confession and then a "last Mass." During the ceremony he was often required to kneel beneath a black cloth that symbolized the descent into the grave. The priest then revoked the leper's legal rights: he was stripped of his possessions, birthright, and name and was forbidden to talk to non-lepers, appear in town, or touch anything outside the leper colony except with a

stick or rod. Finally, in an act meant to represent the burial, the priest led the leper to the parish cemetery and shoveled dirt onto his feet, telling him that he was hereby, forever, and always “dead to the world.” (58).

While these medieval lepers may have been legally considered dead, the fact that they are still living creates a unique space in the narrative for Cresseid to create a new destiny for herself. Also, the gender hierarchy does not seem to be active in this marginal society. Because Cresseid is, as Mathews states, “not registered in legal memory as human, female, or lover,” (59) she may recreate herself free from the constraints of the patriarchal society. This is made possible because of her leprosy, which causes physical deterioration and creates a broken body.

Through her leprosy, Cresseid inhabits a broken body. Just like Bisclavret’s wife, both women have their physical appearance mutilated, though with different mechanisms (e.g. torture and disease), as punishment for their actions. However, this ultimately gives them power, rather than stripping it away. Once this inhabitation occurs, Cresseid begins taking control over her own body rather than allowing it to be accessed and dominated by the whims and desires of men. Independent of her father’s influence, Cresseid decides to leave her father’s home to live in a leper camp: “‘Father, I wald not be kend; / Thairfoir in secreit wyse ye let me gang / To yone hospitall at the tounis end,” [‘Father, I would not be kenned, / So therefore secretly now let me go / Unto the spittal house which stands at end / Of town’] (Henryson 380-383). Cresseid not only decides to leave on her own, but she also wants to avoid being recognized. Her secret flight suggests that she wants to separate herself from her previous identity. Leaving her father’s house and hiding her

identity, Cresseid is no longer associated with the aristocracy and, indeed, because of her broken body, she is no longer viewed as the same woman. This change in physical state positively effects Cresseid. Indeed, the medieval society would have looked upon “leper Cresseid” more favorably than Cresseid after her divorce. Richards explains: “the Church taught that lepers should be treated with compassion. It promoted the idea that lepers were in a sense specially favoured by God because he was enabling them to suffer in this life as Christ has suffered” (Richards 157). Because people were supposed to look on lepers with compassion, Troilus gives Cresseid a considerable amount of money. However, he gives the large amount because she is both leper and Cresseid. He does not recognize Cresseid, but something about her draws him to her: “Yit than hir luik into his mynd it brocht / The sweit visage and amorous blenking / Of fair Cresseid, sumtyme his awin darling” [But still her look into his mind had brought / The sweet visage and amorous glancing / Of fair Cresseid, one time his own true darling] (Henryson 502-504). Since Troilus cannot physically identify Cresseid, the couple is not reunited. However, this is a positive point in the narrative since Cresseid needs to be separate from the masculine hegemony to gain agency. Her brief encounter with Troilus positively effects Cresseid because she gains money for herself and the leper community, but because of the hybridity of her broken body she is not forced to ascribe to the marriage narrative that has previously caused problems for her. By receiving the “purse of gold and gayest gems” during this encounter she not only benefits from her hybridity, but so does the leper community to which she now belongs.

Cresseid operates within the leper community as an equal among others as opposed to being dependent on the men in her life. The leper communities had laws that everyone had to abide by and these regulations were gender neutral. Within this community, Cresseid lives a collaborative existence. She helps her community by begging. For the first time, Cresseid is contributing to her society, rather than just being a pretty face. This position gives Cresseid agency because she is actively participating in supporting a group of people and they are supporting her. She is also not expendable like she was to Diomedes.

When she first arrives at the leper community she is not recognized even though she is well known. Through her mannerisms they discern that she is of noble birth, but that is not the reason that they take her in:

Sum knew hir weill, and sum had na knowledge  
Of hir becaus scho was sa deformait,  
With bylis blak ovirspreid in hir visage,  
And hir fair colour faidit and alterait.  
Yit thay presumit, for hir hie regrait  
And still murning, scho was of nobill kin;  
With better will thairfor they tuik hir in. (Henryson 393-399)<sup>11</sup>

The lepers do what none have done before: judge Cresseid based on something other than her beauty and status. They take her in because she is like them, a leper, and therefore an

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<sup>11</sup> Some knew her well and some had no knowledge  
Of her, who was deformed beyond belief,  
With blackish boils spread over her visage  
And her fair color faded like a leaf;  
And quiet tears, she was of noble kin:  
With better will therefore they took her in. (Stearns 393-399)

equal. Because of Cresseid's broken body, she is able to operate within this community that values her for something that she has control over: her productiveness. The destruction of her physical body disconnects her from the prescribed notion that women had to be dependent on men. Instead, Cresseid is able to enter into a symbiotic relationship with the lepers through begging for their community.

Through her leprosy and begging, she begins to gain control that she then bequeaths after her death. However, it is Cresseid's brokenness that allows her to take ownership over her "property" and gives her the power to write her own testament because she is no longer operating as feminine:

'Heir I beteeche my corps and carioun  
With wormis and with taidis to be rent;  
My cop and clapper, and myne ornament,  
And all my gold the lipper folk sall have,  
Quhen I am deid, to burie me in grave.  
"This royall ring, set with this rubie reid,  
Quhilk Troylus in drowrie to me send,  
To him agane I leif it quhen I am deid,  
To mak my cairfull deid unto him kend.  
Thus I conclude schortlie and mak ane end:  
My spreit I leif to Diane, quhair scho dwellis,  
To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis. (Henryson 577-588)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Here I bequeath my corpse and carrion  
To worms and toads to be their nourishment;  
My cup and clapper and my ornaments  
And all my gold the leper folk's shall be  
When I am dead, if they will bury me.  
'This royal ring set with this ruby red,  
Which Troilus in token once did send,  
I leave again to him when I am dead,  
That he my doleful death may apprehend:  
Thus I conclude shortly and make an end;  
My soul I leave to Diane, where she dwells,

Through this testament she takes ownership over, not only physical possessions, but her body and soul as well. The contents of Cresseid's testament are important when discussing her agency and the way that her broken body has changed her. By bequeathing her corpse to the worms and toads, she is taking ownership over her physical body. She decided to whom her body belongs as well as its purpose. She chooses to leave her body as nourishment for creatures to live off of, becoming part of the circle of life and using her body as a means to give back to the earth. Cresseid, who was once at the mercy of the decisions of the gods, is now appropriating spiritual and indeed judicial authority over her own soul by leaving it to Diane rather than leaving her soul to the discretion of the same gods that gave her leprosy.

Just as she has control over her physical body, Cresseid has control over her physical possessions as well and gives her cup, clapper, and gold to the lepers which are her only worldly assets besides the royal ring. She decides to do something productive with these items and give them to her new society to help them in the future. The only material good that she does not leave to the leper community is the ring that Troilus gave her. The returning of the ring symbolically further severs the ties between them. As I discussed earlier, the continued separation of Cresseid and Troilus positively affects Cresseid because she is not attaching herself to a man. She is not forced to ascribe to the marriage narrative and through her brokenness and subsequent othering, she is not confined to the restraints of gender roles. It is important to note that before her leprosy

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To walk with her in woodland wastes and wells, (577-58)



Cresseid did not have agency over her own body or possessions. Her body was passed from man to man throughout her life—from her father, to Troilus, Diomedes, the men after her divorce, and back to her father. Because of her leprosy, and the social change that this disease affords her, the cycle is broken. Cresseid also would have lost the rights to her assets after her divorce as Mathews explained.

Beyond the bequeathing of tangible objects, such as her body and material possessions, Cresseid gives her soul to Diane, the goddess of chastity. Just as Cresseid takes ownership of her property and body, she now takes ownership over her soul by leaving her soul to the goddess of her choosing. While she is punished for blaspheming the gods, the underlying cause is that she blames the gods for her “unclean and lecherous” lifestyle (Stearns 285). By leaving her soul to Diane, chastity being the opposite of lechery, Cresseid is, in a sense, absolving herself of her crimes. Before her leprosy, Cresseid had no say about the judgement of her own soul and is powerless when the gods deliver their punishment. Now, because of her broken body, Cresseid has gained the agency to decide not only the fate of her corporal self, but also her spirit. Cresseid, who was once at the mercy of the decisions of the gods, is now appropriating spiritual and indeed judicial authority over her own soul by leaving it to Diane rather than leaving her soul to the discretion of the same gods that gave her leprosy.

While the contents of the testament are important, the actual penning of the will itself is even more so. Laura Wang states in “Cresseid’s Testament: Rewriting Herself”: “In writing her testament, Cresseid reclaims a certain amount of agency in spite of her

history, disfiguring disease and her literal marginalisation” (144). While I do believe that the writing of the testament gives Cresseid agency, I argue that it is not “in spite of” her marginalization that she gains power, but “because of” it. Her broken body causes her to separate herself from a society that does not allow for a woman to write a testament or implement any form of female agency. Like Bisclavret’s wife, Cresseid enters into the state of the broken body. After her body is physically destroyed and stripped of its female beauty, she is then free to enact gendered and social change by removing herself from the masculine hegemony; the wife also defies the laws that restrict women from writing their own testament. After her death, her body continues to be productive as sustenance for the worms and toads.

While Bisclavret’s wife and Cresseid predominantly take agency over their own lives through their broken bodies, Saint Margaret actively takes power over her tormentor, Olibrius’, subjects. Because of her broken body, she converts the masses that witness her spectacle. Margaret is tortured because she refuses to marry Olibrius. The torture that Margaret experiences destroys not only her body, but her feminine beauty as well. Olibrius tells his men to “Strupeð hire steort-naket ant hongeð hire on heh up, ant beteð hire bere bodi wið bittere besmen.” [Strip her stark naked and hang her high, flog her bare body with biting rods.]<sup>13</sup> After this, “hire leofliche lich þet hit brec oueral ant liðerede o blode” [her fair skin was broken all over and streamed with blood] (Millett 52) and “blod bearst ut ant strac adun of hire bodi as stream deð of welle” [blood burst out

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<sup>13</sup> Translation and all subsequent translations taken from Bella Millett, and cited parenthetically throughout the text. This quotation p.52.

and ran down her body like a stream from a spring] (Millett 52). During the second session of torture, Olibrius orders his men to “Strupeð hire steort-naket ant heoueð hire on heh up, saw þet ha hongu to mede of hire honkers, ant ontendeð hire bodi wið bearninde teaperes” [Strip her stark naked and raise her up high, so she may hang as payment for her insults, and burn her body with lighted tapers] (Millett 74). Margaret’s body has been beaten and burned as punishment for her steadfastness. Indeed, a narrative emphasis is placed on Margaret’s body as the readers are given depictions of the physical state of her body post torture. Also, at Olibrius’ behest, her body is always presented naked, possibly to further shame the saint and to present the audience with an unimpeded view of the destruction of her body.

A female saint’s position within her story is implicitly linked to her body and Margaret is no exception. Margaret’s body must be broken in order for her to become a saint. As Robertson states: “Because a woman can never escape her body, her achievement of sanctity has to be through the body” (Robertson 269). Her body must be broken for her to ascend into heaven as a saint and cause the conversions of the people. Indeed, the brokenness of her body is what connects her to Christ. This corporal connection with Christ is what gives Margaret her power to convert people during her life and after her death. If Margaret was not tortured, she would just be another one of the nameless martyrs that were sentenced to death. But because she was tortured, she gains agency to defy the masculine hegemony and cause conversions.

Once the torture destroys Margaret's body, she begins to undermine the masculine hegemony by publicly denouncing Olibrius. Though Margaret defies Olibrius' orders before her torture, by refusing to marry him, after her torture Margaret is attacking not only Olibrius the man, but also the masculine dominated institution that he represents. What makes the two instances different is after her torture, Margaret's defiance has an audience. As Margaret's torture continues, more people come to view the process: "Striken men þiderwart of eauereuch strete for to seo þet sorhe þet me walde leggen on hire leofliche bodi 3ef ha to þe reues read ne buhe ne ne beide" [People streamed in from every street to see the suffering that was to be inflicted on her lovely body if she did not submit to the prefect's wishes] (Millett 74). Olibrius' subjects are now witnessing a broken bodied woman speaking out against a male ruler. Margaret repeatedly calls Olibrius various types of dogs such as heateliche hund [vicious dog] (Millett 56) and heaðene hund [heathen dog] (Millett 54) and proclaims that his gods are false: "Ah þu witlese with wurgest as þu art wurðe, blodles and banles, dumbe ant deaue baðe" [But you are fit for nothing but to worship senseless idols, not made of flesh and blood, and dumb and deaf as well] (Millett 74). Most importantly, Olibrius cannot break Margaret's will. The audience sees a young woman who has the strength to continuously deny a man of power what he desires: "Ant tu, grisliche gra, þu luðere liun lað Godd, þi mihte schal unmutlin ant melten to riht noht, ant tu schalt eauer i sar | ant i sorhe swelten, hwen Ich gomeni wið Godd ant gleadie buten ende" [And you, you loathsome fiend, you raging lion hateful to God, your power will diminish and dwindle to nothing, and you will suffer for ever in pain and misery while I rejoice with God in unending bliss] (Millett 54).

Margaret's prediction that Olibrius will lose his power is correct. He has no control over Margaret. She continues to speak and praise God despite Olibrius' orders to stop and therefore she is challenging his authority. This challenge subverts Olibrius' power and that authoritative power is thus transferred to Margaret as she now commands the attention of the crowd. Margaret's actions continue to take power away from Olibrius as she converts his people to her faith, showing Olibrius' control over his own people diminishing.

Having the attention of the crowd not only helps Margaret defy the masculine hegemony, but also provides the ideal environment for her to convert the people. The crowd's relationship with Margaret begins as sympathy: "Alle þe þear weren, wepmen ba ant wum|men, remden of reowðe ant meanden þes meiden" [All those who were there, both men and women, wept for compassion and pitied this maiden] (Millett 52). Because they witness the breaking of Margaret's body, they empathize with her rather than their emperor. Margaret uses this opportunity to try to convert the people: "Ah leue 3e, Ich reade ow, o þe liuiende Godd, mihti ant meiful an euch godes ful, þe hereð þeo þe him cleopieð to, ant heouene-3etes openeð" [But take my advice and put your trust in the living God, mighty and powerful and full of all goodness, who listens to those who call on him, and opens heaven's gates] (Millett 52-54). Before she is ultimately executed, the crowd does convert after God releases her from her bonds:

O þet ilke time turden to ure Lauerd fif þusent men, 3et wiðuten itald children ant wummen; ant alle weren ananriht, as Þe reue het hit, o Cristes kinewurðe nome

hefdes bicoruen, in a burh of Armenie Caplimet inempnet, alle heriende Godd wið  
up-aheue steuene, ant stihen alle martyrs wið murhðe to heouene. (Millett 76)<sup>14</sup>

This conversion would not have been possible if Margaret's body had not been destroyed. Much like her dismissal of Olibrius' commands, Margaret's worship is made more powerful by praising God while inhabiting a broken body. The crowd sees her body beaten and bloody, and yet the young woman still prays to God and remains loyal to her pledge of virginity despite the looming threat of even more torture. The crowd also sees her suffering rewarded when God destroys the vat of water meant to drown Margaret. The conversion of over 5,000 people would not have been possible if Margaret's body was unmarred. Her body was a sign of the lengths she would take for her God.

Like Bisclavret's wife and Cresseid, after Margaret uses her broken body to defy the masculine hegemony, she is removed from the narrative. In all three of the narratives in this study, readers are left with very little information about what happens after the death or narrative removal of these women. Margaret is executed by one of Olibrius' men. However, even after her death, her body remains productive by forcing demons to repent, converting people, and healing the sick. Once her soul ascends to heaven:

Þe feondes þe þer weren, deadliche idoruen, fengen to ȝeien: 'Margarete, meiden,  
leoðe nuðe lanhure ant lowse ure bondes. We beoð wel icnawen þet nis na lauerd

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<sup>14</sup> At the time this happened five thousand men were converted to our Lord, and this not counting the women and children; and all of them were, as the governor commanded, beheaded at once in Christ's royal name, in a city of Armenia called Caplimet, all honouring God with upraised voices, and all ascended as martyrs joyfully to heaven. (Millett 77)

bute Godd, þe þu on leuest.’ Turnden þa þurh þis to Crist swiðe monie; ant comen dumbe ant deaue to hire bodi as hit lei, and botneden alle. (Millett 82)<sup>15</sup>

Even though we only get a few sentences about what Margaret’s broken body does after her death, it is clear that her body is still producing—it is still actively effecting people even though her soul no longer inhabits her body. It was only through torture and the destruction of her body that Margaret could become a saint. Because of her sainthood, her corpse is considered to be holy and therefore, it can be used as a tool to help heal people and strengthen people’s faith.

While it is true that women in the Middle Ages are primarily defined by their bodies, I argue that it is through the breaking of their bodies that women gain agency. Jessica Tooker states: “Violence serves as a catalyst for the witness’s reconceptualization of the world, and it is through the imperfect articulation of its display that it becomes a potential agent for the transformation” (32). Because violence has been done to their bodies, be it through torture or a degenerative disease, these women’s identities are transformed. By examining Bisclavret’s wife’s actions more closely, we can engage more deeply with the few lines Marie writes about her often-dismissed future. After Bisclavret’s wife is tortured and has her nose bitten off, she gains the life that she wants because, through her broken body, she is no longer constrained by the patriarchal system of law. She lives a happy life with the knight, free of any fear or anxiety caused by her

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<sup>15</sup> The devils that were there, dreadfully distressed, began to cry out: ‘Margaret, maiden, now at least let go and loosen out bonds. We have to confess that there is no Lord but the God you believe in.’ Very many people were converted to Christ at the time through this; and the dumb and deaf came to her body as it lay, and all were healed. (Millett 83)

first husband. After her banishment from the narrative, her broken body continues to produce by bearing children. Cresseid redefines her space in society by living out the rest of her life in a leper colony. Through her brokenness, Cresseid establishes herself within a gender-neutral society where she contributes to those around her. She is no longer an object of masculine desire, but a woman divorced from the masculine narrative. Cresseid breaks traditional gender roles by writing her own testament and her broken body is used to feed the worms and toads. Lastly, after being tortured, Margaret operates within a broken body. She uses her body as a figure of Christ to convert a large number of people, simultaneously undermining the emperor Olibrius. After her execution, Margaret's body produces milk and continuously used as a method of conversions.

Women characters like saints and “fallen” wives are not usually grouped together in scholarship, most likely because critics tend to be concerned with how these characters arrived at being the subjects of physical violence—be it the determination of a saint or righteous punishment against an evil woman. However, I am concerned with what happens *after* their bodily transformation regardless of the circumstances that cause these women to have their bodies broken. I argue here that it is unnecessary to determine in each case whether or not a female character deserved their punishment, just what the physically destructive penalty allows them to do within the confines of their narrative.

By defining the physical and social parameters that comprise a broken body, we are able to compare women in narratives that are not usually discussed in conjunction with one another. We can also begin to discuss the agency that these women possess not



“in spite of” brokenness, but instead, “because of” brokenness. We can read brokenness as a tool—a method by which women in these medieval texts can gain power—to defy laws that perpetuate the masculine hegemonic system, to take ownership over their own bodies, or even to create mass conversions.

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## MURDEROUS MOTHERS: IMPLICATIONS OF FILICIDE IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

Motherhood, regardless of time or place, is a complex identity and social position. The Middle Ages was an era where women fell into categories determined by their marital and sexual status: virgins, wives, widows, and mothers. As such, motherhood appears to be a central part of a woman's life. The centrality of motherhood to a woman helped to perpetuate the masculine hegemony. Having children, specifically sons, was how family lines continued and, as such, would be a predominate concern regarding reproduction across cultures. In this way, motherhood is part of the patriarchy as it perpetuates male succession. Furthermore, wives were supposed to be submissive to their husbands, making the identity of wife and mother reflective of masculine dominance.

Motherhood certainly operates as one of the main functions of a woman during this period. But how then do we navigate instances of women destroying their maternal identity through murdering their children? Not only are they destroying patriarchal succession and in a significant way subverting the masculine hegemony, but also eliminating their feminine marker of mother. The purpose of this essay is to explore the various ways mothers who commit filicide across medieval texts are portrayed and, specifically, how that portrayal varies across cultures, specifically English and Norse. In some cases, mothers cause the death of their children by enticing another party to commit the murder and in other cases it is the women themselves who perform the act. I will be

analyzing both cases, as it is the mother, by her own will and desire, who directly causes the death of her child. The examples of child murder that I will be citing are either from the medieval English tradition or that of the Norse because, even though these two groups of people are geographically close (and they certainly intersected during the Middle Ages), their cultures are very distinct. English authors Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Malory provide two examples of mothers who cause the death of their child. First, in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, the sultanness orders her son's death after learning that he is going to convert to Christianity in order to marry Constance. Malory's *Le Mort d'Arthur* depicts a mother who poisons her child, albeit the child was not the intended target, in the form of Tristram's stepmother. Two Norsewomen complete similar actions in *The Saga of the Volsungs*: Signy, who orders her brother to kill her children, and Gudrun, who kills her two sons.

Before I begin my textual analysis, I would like to explain how motherhood was not necessarily homogeneous in England and Scandinavia and further, murder was also understood differently in the two regions. This understanding of both motherhood and murder will inform how the mothers in these works are read. Possibly, the main reason for the differences between these cultures is their religious practices—the English being Christian and the Norse being pagan. Iceland was not converted to Christianity until 1000 and Norway was not Christianized until the 13th century, which is when the *Sagas* were written down. The heavy pagan origins of the Norse countries continued to influence their culture even after the spread of Christianity. These two cultures, because of their religious influences viewed women differently. For example, Christian ideas of

motherhood are explicitly laid out in the Bible and emphasized as extremely important. 1 Timothy 2:15 states: “Yet she [woman] shall be saved through childbearing; if she continue in faith, and love, and sanctification, with sobriety.”<sup>1</sup> Here, a woman’s relationship with her faith was directly linked to her reproductivity. Similarly, the most celebrated woman in the New Testament, Mary, is known for her position as the virgin mother. The celebration of Mary was certainly prevalent in the high and late Middle Ages as images of the Holy Mother were depicted in artworks and churches.<sup>2</sup> But despite the popularity of Mary as a Biblical figure, mothers living in the Middle Ages were not venerated like the Holy Mother. Both Shulamith Shahar and Carolyn Walker Bynum assert that Mary did not have a prominent effect on the image or status of everyday, historical mothers, who were not treated with any type of elevated status after they conceived.<sup>3</sup> However, we can make the connection that mothers were expected to be not only submissive and obedient to God, but also compassionate toward their children because Mary is the maternal archetype. The love that a Christian mother was supposed to have toward her children was reflective of God’s love: unconditional and everlasting.<sup>4</sup> However, just because women were supposed to have a strong maternal bond with their children, the reality of the medieval English culture was not always aligned with these ideals.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bible*. Douay-Rhims Version, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*. Routledge, 2003, pp. 99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 49.15

According to Peggy McCracken, fathers were the ones who had legal rights over their children, while women were only viewed as caregivers.<sup>5</sup> Legal rights, specifically in terms of children, favor men. Perhaps the medieval understanding of reproductive biology played a role in the legal situation. As observed by Angela Florschuetz, men were the only ones who could inherit because, according to Aristotle, only men could transfer seed and women were merely containers who did not contribute to the biological heredity of their children. Because children were seen as carriers of only their father's seed, the father had more legal rights to children rather than the mother who was simply a vessel.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the mother will always be seen as secondary—legally, physically, and socially—to the father.

Henry Mayr-Harting and Shahar mirror the claim that mothers were considered legally inferior to fathers. Mayr-Harting asserts that there is evidence that suggests that most widows did not have custody of their children after the death of their husband.<sup>7</sup>

Shahar's work supports this claim:

English noblewomen did not act as guardians for their sons who inherited fiefs. If there were several children, only those who had not inherited were entrusted to the guardianship of their mother. The heir or heiress was given into the custody of a guardian appointed by the lord, and it was this guardian who arranged their marriages.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, pp. 55

<sup>6</sup> Angela Florschuetz, *Marking Maternity in Middle English Romance: Mothers, Identity, and Contamination*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, "Twelfth-Century English Mothers," *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400*, edited by Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith, Ashgate, 2011, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, p. 141-142.



The fact that children were considered to be biologically separate from their mothers, but also legally, if their father died, perpetuated an image of motherhood that is not reflective of Mary's relationship with Jesus. Instead, we see an odd juxtaposition between mothers who were expected to be loving and nurturing, and mothers who could be denied access to their children if their husband were to die.

Not only could a mother be separated from her children upon the death of their husband, but fosterage was a common practice that also separated mother and child. Children would leave their mothers to be trained as squires, knights or apprentices, or members of the clergy. Shahar states:

[T]hey were usually sent away from home at an early age. The children of many noblemen were sent at the age of 6 or 7 to the courts of other lords to be educated there. Children who were sent to town schools or schools attached to monasteries were usually dispatched there very young, and lived on the spot: in the monasteries, in their tutors' homes or in colleges.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, fosterage mainly applied to people of a certain social standing. Lower class families, such as farmers, would keep their children home to work. However, the family units that are studied in this paper, as well as most other literary characters of the time, are of an elevated rank. Therefore, we can assume that a large portion of mothers that appear in literary texts would have experienced or dealt with fosterage and the prolonged absence from their adolescent children would have effected mothers in some way.

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p. 142.

All of the above information is just a small facet of what makes motherhood in medieval England complex. These mothers were expected to replicate Mary's nature, but they were not given the elevated status that Mary held. English mothers were viewed as secondary to fathers because heredity was thought to only be passed down through the male. Also, mothers only had access to their children for a short window of time, as most were sent away to be fostered, and if their husbands died unexpectedly, custody, in most cases, did not pass to the mother. All of these aspects present an intricate picture of English mothers in the Middle Ages.

Motherhood for early Norsewomen, while similar in terms of patriarchal primacy, held some distinct differences from their English counterparts. The reason I will be analyzing mothers from this period is because, though written in the 13th century, episodes in *Saga* were pulled from historical events that took place in the 4th and 5th centuries. As such, it is important to understand the historical context of the *Saga*'s setting. During this time, one could say that children were viewed as product of politics rather than anything concerning religion. Marriages were frequently arranged between two feuding families to end the violence amid the houses. Because of this, a woman's role in marriage was to act as a *friþwebba* (peace-weaver)<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, children produced from this union would be a way to cement the merging of the two families. While both cultures viewed children in terms of succession, there is no explicit connection between motherhood and religion in the Norse tradition. While many of their

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<sup>10</sup> Victoria Woodzak. "Of Weavers and Warriors: Peace and Destruction in the Epic Tradition." *Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1998, pp. 253-262.

goddesses did bear children, there was no Holy Mother to emulate. The closest example could perhaps be Freyja, the goddess of fertility. Also, bearing children did not denote a devout woman (as Paul expresses in the Christian tradition) in the Norse culture. Further, motherhood was perhaps not as central to female identity in the Norse tradition because the roles of Norsewomen were more varied than those of the English. For instance, Valkyries, while sometimes referring to the mythical creature in the Norse religion as women who ferry warriors to Valhalla.<sup>11</sup> It is also a term that is synonymous with shieldmaidens—female warriors. Oftentimes, however, women would lay down their weapons after marriage and children. This connects familial life with the loss of freedom for these Norse women and, as such, some women put off marriage for as long as possible.<sup>12</sup> This shows an alternative lifestyle that was simply not available to Englishwomen.

However, regardless of more opportunities afforded women in Norse culture, men still had the primary right to the children, as in later medieval England. However, patriarchal fatherly practices were far more extreme in their capacity for violence in Norse culture which had a profound effect on the mother-child relationship. The practice of *barnaútburðr* (child exposure) is a key example. *Barnaútburðr* entailed a baby being taken away from its mother immediately after birth and presented to the father for judgement. If the father did not like what he saw (e.g. questionable paternity) the baby

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<sup>11</sup> Jenny Jochens. *Old Norse Images of Women*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, pp. 38-39

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen M. Self. "The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2014, pp. 143-172.

would be *út borinn* (carried out) and left to die.<sup>13</sup> Jenny Jochens explains that these women would have separated themselves emotionally from their children as a means of self-preservation: “[...] a woman could not be certain of keeping her child. Furthermore, if the infant was exposed she would have to recover faster after parturition than if she had kept it, since the intermittent respite provided by nursing was replaced by an immediate return to full-time work despite her aching, bleeding, and lactating body.”<sup>14</sup> While Jochens claims that the possibility of infant mortality made mothers emotionally distant from their children, other scholars maintain that a high infant mortality rate would not have effected a mother’s bond with her children.<sup>15</sup> However, while we may not be able to effectively define these mothers’ psychological state, we can state the practice of *barnaútburðr* had an effect on these mothers’ relationships with both their children and husband in some way. What the *barnaútburðr* tradition does reveal is that fathers in early Scandinavia are the parent with the most power and that they were allowed in certain circumstances to kill their children without consequence in early Norse history. Norse mothers would have to deal with the anxiety of possibly losing a healthy child to the wills of their husbands every time they gave birth. However, Norsewomen were relieved of an anxiety that English mothers had: Norsewomen would not lose custody of

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<sup>13</sup> Jenny Jochens. “Old Norse Motherhood,” *Medieval Mothering*, edited by John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, Routledge, 1999, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>15</sup> Mayr-Harting, “Twelfth-Century English Mothers,” pp. 122.

their children if their husband died. According to Icelandic law, if one parent died, the other retained custody.<sup>16</sup>

Both the Norse and English had to navigate the practice of fosterage, which was also prevalent in Norse culture. Children in Scandinavia would be fostered from the time they were eight or younger to sixteen.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes children as young as one year old would be sent away.<sup>18</sup> However, fosterage in Norse culture did not always mean that children left their family home. For the Norse, a *fostir* was anyone other than the biological parents that contributed to the raising of the child.<sup>19</sup> Foster parents also had legal rights to their foster child, though the biological parents still retained primacy. Foster fathers had the right to kill for their foster daughters, though the foster father must be legally documented as such.<sup>20</sup> While both English and Norse parents did send their children away to be fostered, the Norse place a distinct emphasis on the fact the sending a child to be fostered is a great honor and the child would have been viewed as highly esteemed.<sup>21</sup> Regardless, children were still oftentimes separated from their parents at a young age, causing a unique relationship between parent and child as most of the bonding done between them would have been before the age of eight. Perhaps this contributed, both in English and Norse traditions, to more distant familial relationships as parents

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Hansen, "Fosterage and Dependency in Medieval Iceland and its Significance in *Gísla Saga*," *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, edited by Shannon Lewis-Simpson, Brill, 2008, pp. 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás, with Material from Other Manuscripts*, translated by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, University of Manitoba Press, 1980, pp. 151.

<sup>18</sup> Jochens, "Old Norse Motherhood," pp.207.

<sup>19</sup> Hansen, "Fosterage and Dependency in Medieval Iceland" pp. 73.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 73.

often spent less than a decade with their children before they were sent off and became adults under the instruction of someone else. Aspects of motherhood, both in the English and the Norse cultures are complex and varied. However, it is clear that Norsewomen experienced motherhood differently than Englishwomen, especially regarding how one was expected to act and the diverse anxieties that surround motherhood.

Just as motherhood operated differently between the English and Norse, murder was also handled differently in the two societies. Specifically, regarding the murder of one's own child, English culture made a definite distinction between fathers and mothers. Again, Christianity plays a major role in this. Bible stories, such as that of Abraham, show the willingness of men to sacrifice their children as proof of their faith: "Take thy only begotten son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and go into the land of vision: and there thou shalt offer him for an holocaust upon one of the mountains which I will shew thee."<sup>22</sup> Abraham does just that, but is stopped just before he kills Isaac. Abraham's willingness to murder his son was not viewed negatively, rather it was an example of his devout faith and he is even rewarded.<sup>23</sup> However, there are no examples of women sacrificing their children. Peggy McCracken explains in *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*: "There are no Biblical examples of mothers who sacrifice their children; when a mother kills her child, the infanticide is always a murder."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, stories such as *Amis and Amiloun* depicted a father killing his

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<sup>22</sup> Genesis 22.2

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 22.17

<sup>24</sup> McCracken, *The Curse of Eve*, p. 42.

children in order to heal his best friend's leprosy. Though Amis asks his wife's permission beforehand, he kills his own children, and, in the end, he is rewarded. His friend is cured, and his children miraculously are returned to life.<sup>25</sup> Amis is rewarded because the killing of his children is viewed as a sacrifice rather than murder, especially since the order to kill his children comes from an angel. Sacrifice only appears to exist within the context of the masculine, not the feminine. Therefore, if a woman was to kill her child for the sake of others, it would not be viewed as sacrifice, but as murder, because women did not have the same parental authority to perform a sacrifice as men.

Historically speaking, filicide did occur in medieval England. Most of these incidences appear to happen within the peasant class. Emily Coleman explains in "Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages" that the motivation for this act was probably caused by a lack of resources; families unable to feed all of their children.<sup>26</sup> There are cases of mothers being specifically charged with the murder of their children; however, the punishments for these crimes show an interesting trend. In the introduction to *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, the editors explain that women who were not found to be insane or possessed suffered little punishment for killing their children:

Women were often presumed to be guilty in cases of child death—even when the death could more likely have occurred accidentally—but assigned only the mildest of penances because of their own status as intellectually inferior creatures.

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<sup>25</sup> Amis and Amiloun, *The Chief Middle English Poets*, edited by Jessie Laidlay Weston, Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1914, p. 174-204.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Coleman, "Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages," *Women in Medieval Society*, edited by Susan Mosher Stuard, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976, pp. 62.

And when they were not treated like children, or considered insane or possessed by demons, the death was determined to be accidental.<sup>27</sup>

It was not conceivable that a medieval mother would willingly and consciously kill her own child. Therefore, child deaths caused by the mother were labeled as accidental. Certainly, filicide was a reality for the medieval populous if there were laws specifically in place for such an occurrence.

For the early Norse, laws regarding murder in general were quite different from the late English. Killing was ingrained into the Norse society—a product of their religion. Pillaging and plundering were praised and dying in battle was a high honor as it insured a seat in Valhalla. The legal repercussions of killing someone was therefore different. Killing was only considered murder, and therefore punishable, if it was done in secret. For example, killing at night was considered murder because it was not done out in the open where others could see. Similarly, if one hid the body of the person they slayed, then it was murder.<sup>28</sup> If a killing did take place in the open, then a person was supposed to give gold rings to the deceased's family in a practice called *wergild* or the family was compensated with other monetary means. If the compensation was not payed, or was not sufficient, then the deceased's family could then kill their kin's murderer or a member of the opposing family as revenge. This societal norm creates an environment where murder was expected, and, as discussed earlier, the practice of killing infants was

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<sup>27</sup> Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price, editors. *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, University Press of Florida, 2002, pp. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Grágás, pp. 146.



also commonplace. However, the practice of *barnaútburðr* was removed from law when Christianity took over as the predominate religion, showing that religion had a definite effect on the way the Norse viewed children.<sup>29</sup>

The point of this contextualization is to illustrate the complexities of motherhood and how English and Norse mothers are not directly comparable as they have different religious and cultural implications. Furthermore, we must understand that what the English, and even we as readers, would conceive of as murder, was not necessarily synonymous with the Norse conception of murder. When comparing mothers who murder their children, one must remember these distinctions. These concepts also play a role in how these mothers were viewed by their prospective societies. By comparing the English and the Norse cultures we are able to see how specific textual moments, such as a mother committing filicide, operate and are understood very differently because of the societies varying views on both motherhood and murder.

I will begin the literary examples of murdering mothers with the sultaness from Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*. When the reader is first introduced to the sultaness, Chaucer immediately presents her as a villain by calling her a "welle of vyces."<sup>30</sup> This title already portrays the sultaness as someone immoral. It is important to note that characteristics of "otherness" are already working against her: she is from a foreign land and, most significantly, a non-Christian. However, her son is not presented as filled with

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<sup>29</sup> Jochens, "Old Norse Motherhood," pp. 205

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales, The Man of Law's Tale*, edited by W. W. Skeat, Barnes and Noble Classics, 2007, pp. 698 line 323.

vice even though he is of the same faith as his mother. What separates the two characters is their willingness to convert. The son readily decides to convert to Christianity in order to marry Constance, but the sultanness is against this action:

How that my sone in point is for to lete  
The holy lawes of our Alkaron,  
Yeven by goddess message Makomete.  
But oon avow to grete god I hete,  
The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte  
Than Makometes lawe out of myn herte!<sup>31</sup>

Because of her loyalty to her own faith, the empress is viewed negatively because; even though religious dedication was praised, the sultanness is not dedicated to the “right” religion—Christianity. Having already structured the empress as a villain, Chaucer then presents the reader with the sultanness’ plot to have her son killed:

“We shul first feyne us critendom to take,  
Cold water shal not greve us but a lyte;  
And I shal swich a feste and revel make,  
That, as I trowe, I shal the sowdon quyte.  
For though his wyf be cristned never so whyte  
She shal have need to wasshe away the rede,  
Thogh she a font-ful water with hir lede.”<sup>32</sup>

While murder, especially of a one’s child, is not excusable, the sultanness’ motivations behind killing her son are not considered by the narrator as he passes judgement on her. She does not kill her son without thought or to simply gain power, but because of her religious beliefs.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 698 line 331-336.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 700 line 351-357.

The sultanness' reason for having her son murdered is a religious one. Because her son is turning his back on his faith, the sultanness begins to fear the wrath of God: "What shulde us tyden of this newel awe / But thraldom to our bodies and penance? / And afterward in helle to be drawe / For we reneyed Mahoun our creance?"<sup>33</sup> From her viewpoint, the empress is sacrificing her son to appease God and save herself and her people from hell. However, as asserted earlier, the English did not believe that women had the right to, or were capable of, sacrifice—an action reserved for men. Because she is a woman, the filicide is not viewed as an act of religious faith, as Abraham's attempt was, but is instead a murderous act. The murder is made doubly bad in the eyes of the English audience because the deity that is receiving the sacrifice is not the Christian God, but the god of Islam. Therefore, both narrator and audience view the sultanness as evil and the death of her son unjust.

While the sultanness is the fixture for all of the negativity presented by the narrator, it is important to note that the text does not make it clear whether or not the sultanness physically kills her son: "This olde sowdanesse, cursed crone,/Hath with hir frendes doon this cursed dede."<sup>34</sup> This is not explicitly stating that the sultanness killed her son herself, or even if another party killed him, just that they acted as a unit and "The sowdan and the Cristen everichone/Ben at to-hewe and stiked at the bord."<sup>35</sup> However, later in the poem, the narrator states: "the cursed wikked sowdeanesse/That at the feste

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 698 line 337-340.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 704 line 432-433

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 704 line 429-430

leet sleen both more and lesse.”<sup>36</sup> This quote indicates that the sultanness perhaps had a passive role in the murders insofar as she orchestrated the plot, but someone else physically carried out the plan. If we are reading the attack as being fulfilled by a second party, do we then view the Sultanness any differently? Perhaps, since the murder was implemented by a large group, we can view the decision to kill the Christian party not as the selfish act of the Sultanness, but as a decision made by a large portion of the society. The people that the sultanness convinces to act with, or for, her certainly believe in the same potential outcome of eternal damnation. This then is indicative of a group consensus. However, despite this group dynamic, it is the sultanness who receives all the blame from the narrator.

The fixation on the sultanness points to the narrator having another problem with her other than filicide. The problem is not that the mother killed her son, but that the mother destroyed patriarchal succession. The sultanness’ plan to save her people’s souls was not only incumbent upon the death of her son, but the removal of patriarchal power. A woman usurping power from men was a source of anxiety in the Middle Ages. Chaucer explored this anxiety in other tales as well. According to Allyson Newton: “Masculine anxieties generated by fears of subversive interruptions of phallic power saturate the *Clerk’s Tale*. Such anxieties seem rooted not only in the perceived threat to the transmission of phallic power by the mother, as a biblical narrative of Rebekah and Isaac suggests.”<sup>37</sup> This same fear flows through the *Man of Law’s Tale*. Here, we have a

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 736 line 958-959

<sup>37</sup> Alyson Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*.” *Medieval Mothering*, pp. 65.

woman who removes masculine power (e.g. her son) and takes over as ruler. However, the masculine hegemony rights itself by the end of the narrative; the sultaness is killed at the behest of Constance's father and not allowed to continue ruling her people. I argue that her death is not, in fact, a reaction to her committing filicide, but to interrupting the masculine hegemony and being a woman with power.

By reading the wife as religiously driven, we begin to see how motherhood was not central to all women. For the sultaness her religious faith took precedence over her son, just as Abraham's obedience to God outweighed his love for Isaac. However, because of the Medieval patriarchal system, the sultaness' killing of her son is not viewed as synonymous to Abraham's devoutness, but instead as monstrous. The monstrosity comes not from the action of filicide, but because the murder was orchestrated by the mother rather than the father. By killing her son, the Sultaness removes her maternal marker. This is the cause of anxiety for the narrator and the tale's contemporary audience because a woman is removing herself, quite violently, from her prescribed feminine gender roles. Florschuetz tells us that "the Man of Law severs the sultaness from femininity altogether, describing her as a virago, a serpent under or hidden by femininity, and a feigned woman."<sup>38</sup> Because of her actions, the Sultaness is no longer viewed as a woman by the male narrator, which shows how synonymous motherhood was to femininity. But, for the Sultaness, motherhood was not her defining attribute, but instead, her religious faith. This problematizes how medieval men viewed and identified

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<sup>38</sup> Florschuetz, *Marking Maternity*, pp. 111.

women—as only mothers and mere vessels whose purpose is to carry on the masculine line of succession.

While the sultaness was concerned with the continuation of Islam, Tristram's step-mother is interested in another form of succession that ultimately ends with the death of her son. Tristram's step-mother, the wife of King Meliodas, is the only mother considered in this essay who does not premeditatively kill her child. Originally, the step-mother plots to kill her step-son Tristram because she wants her own children to inherit: "Then was she heavy and wroth that her children should not rejoice the country of Lyonesse, wherefore this queen ordained for to poison young Tristram."<sup>39</sup> The queen prioritizes her own children above her step-son Tristram and is willing to commit murder to ensure her children's wellbeing. However, the step-mother's own son takes the poison. I hesitate to call the incident accidental because while the queen did not intend to kill her son, his death could have been prevented if she did not have murderous intentions. It is because of the step-mother's own direct actions that her son dies. While the episode with the queen is very brief in the large scheme of Tristram's tale, it offers readers an image of a complex mother.

After the queen's first attempt on Tristram's life, it is evident that she mourns the loss of her child: "So when the queen of Meliodas wist of the death of her son, wit ye well that she was heavy."<sup>40</sup> The queen is also the only mother in this study who appears

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<sup>39</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, edited by Helen Cooper, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 170.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 171.

remorseful for her actions. However, even with one child dead, she still continues with her attempt to kill Tristram. Clearly, the loss of one of her undisclosed number of children was not enough to deter the queen from trying to kill Tristram again—employing the exact same method as before. She appears willing to risk another one of her children's lives to complete her task. While the queen's motivations originally appear to be for the advancement of her children, this ambition led to the death of her son and she continues, despite the risk to the lives of her other children. This shows that perhaps her children were not the focus of her plot. What then could possibly be the queen's motivation? Jennifer Ward tells us that "it is likely that many women saw their children as their greatest achievement, and saw their fulfilment as coming through the lives of their children."<sup>41</sup> This leads to the assumption that perhaps the queen's actions were more selfish than they were originally presented. Given the extremely sparse narrative surrounding the queen, we cannot extrapolate what exactly drives her like we can with the sultanness. However, the queen's motivation appears to go beyond simply wanting the best for her children because she continues to endanger them.

After her second attempt on Tristram's life, the queen's scheme is discovered, and her punishment is to be burned at the stake. Though the queen is condemned to die, it is not clear what crime she is being punished for: the death of her son, attempting to kill Tristram, or almost killing the king. Ernest C. York believes that the step-mother is being

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<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Ward, "Noblewomen, Family, and Identity in Later Medieval Europe," *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations*, edited by Anne J. Duggan, 2000, pp. 256.

sentenced for her attempt on Tristram's life.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, if the wife is not being punished for killing her son, she is going to be burned at the stake, not for murder, but for treason in the form of attempted murder:

For attempted murder early law does not inflict punishment. But here again the concept is involved. After the Queen has accidentally killed her son, Malory says that 'yet the kynge understood nothyng of hir treson' (278). And from the context it is clear that he means by this that the king knew nothing of her plot to kill Tristan. In this passage, then, treason means not murder, but the intent to murder.<sup>43</sup>

She is not even being punished for filicide and, therefore, the negativity surrounding the queen is not because she kills her son, but because she tried to kill Tristram.

The queen is sentenced to burn at the stake, but unlike the sultanness, the queen is not actually killed in the narrative. Instead, Tristram interferes and asks for mercy:

Then said young Tristram, 'Give me the life of your queen, my stepmother.' 'That is unrightfully asked,' said the Kind Meliodas. 'For thou ought of right to hate her, for she would have slain thee with poison; and for thy sake most is my cause that she should be dead.' 'Sir,' said Tristram, 'as for that, I beseech you of your mercy that ye will forgive her; and as for my part, God forgive her, and I do. And it liked so much your highness to grant me boon, for God's love I require you hold your promise.'<sup>44</sup>

However, even though the queen is not killed, she is removed from the narrative and is not heard from again in the text, save a brief mention about how she was proud of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ernest C. York, "Legal Punishment in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*." *English Language Notes*, vol. 11, 1973, pp. 14-21, pp. 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, pp. 171.



man Tristram became. So, while the queen was not killed, narratively speaking she no longer exists as a character and thus experiences a narrative death.

Tristram's saving of his step-mother is meant to be read as gallant act reflective of Tristram's good nature. But, even as Tristram forgives his step-mother for attempting to kill him, he makes no mention of his dead half-brother. The erasure of the dead child calls into question the queen's role as a mother. What I mean by this is, if killing her own child is not important enough to warrant mention or punishment, then how important is her role as mother? While it can be argued that within the narrative the queen simply operates as a plot device to show Tristram's goodness of heart<sup>45</sup>, the lack of exposition surrounding the murdered child is worth noting. Filicide conventionally proves to be a trope that affords more attention, such as the hyper-negativity that surrounds the sultaness. Why then is it ignored in Malory's tale? Perhaps, because the queen's main role in the narrative is not that of a mother, but as a usurper—someone trying to commandeer the line of succession in favor of her own bloodline. Between the narrative ignoring the filicidal subversion of the maternal, and the queen's disregard for the wellbeing of her remaining children, it is clear the queen perhaps is not viewed as a mother, but rather a woman who happens to have children. Further, her reasoning behind planting the poison that ultimately kills her son is fueled by her own ambition to live through her children and their potential capacity to rule Lyonesse.

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<sup>45</sup> Kevin T. Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy: Structuring the Narrative of Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram.'" *Fifteenth Century Studies*, vol. 20, 1993, p. 77-98, *ProQuest*, p. 82-3.

Both the sultaness and queen cause the death of their sons. While their motivations appear to be unlike, one appealing her God and the other potentially searching for power through her children, the motives operate similarly by attempting to continue an institution. The sultaness wants Islam to continue to be the religion of her people and the queen wants to maintain the monarchy of Lyonesse, but through her own bloodline. The duo causes problems for the masculine hegemony perpetuated in Medieval England by domineering the patriarchal mode of succession. The sultaness kills her son and puts herself in charge of the nation while the queen attempts to change the lineage set in place by the king through putting her own children on the throne. Both women are removed from the narratives to right the patriarchal system: the sultaness is killed while the queen is banished both figuratively and literally. What becomes apparent when comparing these two texts is that neither mother is actually punished for committing filicide. Rather, they are punished for their desire to take over or inform the royal lineage of their land. Both, in a way are usurping and manipulating the masculine system of power via the throne.

While the English mothers appear to be attempting control the line of succession in their narrative, the Norsewomen's are concerned with ending a line rather than pushing it a different direction. Signy is one such mother. In the *Saga of the Volsungs*, Signy orders her twin brother to kill her children. Signy, like many women in Norse narratives, acts as a *friþwebba* at the behest of her father, though Signy expresses her dislike of the match: "Then Signy spoke to her father: 'I do not wish to go away with Siggeir, nor do my thoughts laugh with him. I know through my foresight and that special ability found

in our family that if the marriage contract is not quickly dissolved, this union will bring us much misery.”<sup>46</sup> What is important to note is that, unlike English culture, a Norsewoman’s loyalties did not transfer over so starkly to her husband upon marriage. As observed by Jochens, most women, if married to an enemy to cement peace between families, remained loyal to their blood relatives. However, if the marriage was a happy one, then it was possible that the woman’s affection for her husband would outweigh her loyalty to her blood family.<sup>47</sup>

In Signy’s case, it is clear that her loyalty remains with her father and brothers because she did not want to marry and held no affection towards Siggeir. After Siggeir kills Signy’s father and all of her brothers, save her twin Sigmund, Signy plans her revenge against her husband. Because Signy retains loyalty to her blood family rather than her affinitive family, she wants retribution for the death of her family. Her revenge plot consists of having Sigmund train her children to help kill her husband: “King Siggeir had two sons by his wife. It is said that Signy sent the elder, when he was ten years old, to meet with Sigmund so that the boy could help if Sigmund wanted to try to avenge his father.”<sup>48</sup> If, during this brief fosterage, the boy was found weak, he was killed by Sigmund at Signy’s behest: “‘Then take the boy and kill him. He need not live longer.’ And so he did.”<sup>49</sup> It is in this manner that Signy orders the death of both of her sons.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, translated by Jesse L. Byock, Penguin Group, 2013, pp. 39.

<sup>47</sup> Jenny Jochens. *Old Norse Images of Women*. The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, pp. 140.

<sup>48</sup> *Volsungs*, pp. 42.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 42.

While Signy does not physically kill her son, she whets her brother into committing the murders. Enticing, or whetting, is a common theme in the Norse sagas. Women oftentimes convinced men to do their bidding. Whetting was a powerful tool that women employed in these narratives. Englishwomen in medieval narratives are often viewed as conniving or villainous if they entice men to follow their plans. Because of the masculine hegemony surrounding medieval English culture, women taking a domineering role over men was problematic. However, the advice narrative that appears in the Norse mythos could point to the acceptance, or at the very least the removal of the negative connotations that surround whetting.<sup>50</sup> In the *Elder Edda*, gods oftentimes turn to women for advice on important matters. Odin asks Frigg to advise him in *Vafthrúdnismál*<sup>51</sup> and Thor receives helpful advice from a woman on how to defeat Hymir in *Hymiskvida*.<sup>52</sup> Whatever the origin of this theme, whetting was thought to be a powerful tool that women employed. In the introduction to *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, Sarah M. Anderson explains: “[A]s lamenters and as whetters to revenge, women [...] are engaging in one of the few speech acts represented by literature as open to them, and they are speaking on behalf of the customs of their society—not in monstrous aberration from them.”<sup>53</sup> Signy is perpetuating her culture of revenge by employing whetting to kill her children and husband.

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<sup>50</sup> See Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, pp. 162-203.

<sup>51</sup> *The Elder Edda*, translated by Andy Orchard, Penguin Classics, 2013, pp. 39.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 81.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah M. Anderson, “Introduction: ‘og eru köld kvenna ráð.’” *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson, Routledge, 2002, pp. xii-xiii.

While Signy did order the murder of her sons, I argue that she did not associate these children as *hers*, but *Siggeir's* because they did not exude qualities of the Volsung family. This leads Signy to disguise herself and have sex with Sigmund, producing Sinfjotli. The stark difference between her sons, beyond their paternity, is that the first two did not possess the bravery and strength that defines the Volsungs. Even though Sigmund is ignorant of that fact that Sinfjotli is his son, he nevertheless recognizes that the boy “took much after the Volsung race.”<sup>54</sup> All three boys are tested by both Signy and Sigmund. The test of bravery (reaching into a bag of flour with a deadly snake inside) was not passed by either of Siggeir's sons. A Volsung, however, would have no issue performing the task, as seen through Sinfjotli: “‘I am not without suspicion,’ he said, ‘that there was something alive in the flour when I first began kneading, but I have kneaded it in, whatever it was.’”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Signy tests her sons by stitching their clothes to their skin. Her sons by Siggeir both “withstood the ordeal poorly and cried out in pain.” Sinfjotli, on the other hand, expresses that he does not feel pain because of his heritage: “‘Such pain would seem trifling to Volsung.’”<sup>56</sup> Because her eldest two sons did not take after her family, Signy aligns them with their father, whom she has sworn revenge upon, and therefore has no qualms with having them killed.

What makes this reading problematic is the death of her youngest two children by Siggeir. These two children were not tested in the same way as her other children, but

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<sup>54</sup> *Volsungs*, pp. 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 43.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 43.

Signy still insists on their death and attempts to whet Sigmund into killing them when the children tell their father that they saw Sigmund and Sinfjotli:

Signy heard what they said. She rose up, took both children, went to the outer room to Sigmund and Sinfjotli and said they should know that the children had betrayed them, “and I would advice you to kill them.” Sigmund said: “I will not kill your children, even if they have betrayed me.” But Sinfjotli did not falter. He drew his sword and killed both children, casting them into the hall in front of King Siggeir.<sup>57</sup>

The fact that Sigmund refuses to kill these children, as opposed to the first two, shows that there is an inherent difference between the two sets of children. This variation could be, as stated earlier, that they have not been tested to see if they could be considered Volsungs, or even their age. The first two sons were killed at the age of ten, and Signy’s youngest appear to be younger than that—not old enough to begin training.<sup>58</sup> However, another consideration must be discussed as to why Signy had all of her children by Siggeir killed—revenge. As long as members of Siggeir’s bloodline survives, there remains the possibility that they will also seek revenge. The revenge cycle was prominent in Norse culture and literature. The only sure way that the cycle would be broken was by killing the entire family. Specifically, in order for the revenge to be most effective, the children would be killed first to assure the head of the family that he would have no hope of being revenged. Jochens explains: “If vengeance for brothers necessitated killing a husband, the wife first had to sacrifice their children in order to

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 45-46.

<sup>58</sup> The Norse had clear legal considerations for children, showing that there was a set age between a child and adult. For instance, children under the age of twelve could not be tried for murder (*Grágás* 155) and a person must be older than sixteen in order to be a principal in a killing case (*Grágás* 156).

make him understand that he himself could no longer hope that he would be avenged.”<sup>59</sup> Therefore, for Signy to truly gain her revenge against Siggeir all of his children must be killed.

Like the sultanness, Signy’s narrative ends in death, but the main difference between the two is that Signy takes her own life. This is not a matter of the masculine hegemony righting itself through male intervention, as no man physically kills Signy. However, the fact remains, that Signy is removed from the narrative, even though it appears to be by her own choice: “I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance that I am by no means fit to live. Willingly I shall now die with King Siggeir, although I married him reluctantly.”<sup>60</sup> Signy’s suicide could be read as remorse for her actions, like the Tristram’s step-mother’s grief for her son. Jochens asserts that Signy dies at the end of the narrative because, as her sole function was revenge, once Siggeir is dead, she is no longer necessary within the narrative.<sup>61</sup> However, Signy certainly does not read as a mere plot device placed into the narrative for a singular purpose. Arguably, Signy is the driving force behind this section of the *Saga of the Volsungs*. It is Signy who warns her family of Siggeir’s attack, saves Sigmund, and plots revenge. Why then would a seemingly powerful character be removed from the narrative so quickly? My assertion is that whetting, and not physically completing the act herself, is the cause of Signy’s

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<sup>59</sup> Jochens. *Old Norse Images*, pp. 140.

<sup>60</sup> *Volsungs*, pp. 47.

<sup>61</sup> Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, pp. 157.

demise. The reason I make this claim is because of the fate of Gudrun, another revenger in the *Saga of the Volsungs*.

The circumstances that befall Signy and Gudrun are extremely similar. Both women are married off by their families to men to function as a *friðwebba* (Signy to Siggeir and Gudrun to Atli). The husband then breaks that contract and kills his wife's brothers, leaving the wife to avenge her natal family. Both women are responsible for the death of their sons and eventually their husbands. Gudrun pushes the violence even further by tricking her husband into eating his sons. However, the main difference between Signy and Gudrun is that Gudrun kills her sons herself rather than employing whetting. Appearing in the *Elder Edda*<sup>62</sup> and retold in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, Gudrun's narrative explores the complexities of Norse familial, marital, and maternal bonds. Gudrun's maternal identity appears to be directly linked to her marital bonds—the more she cared for her husband, the more she cared for her children by him. It is clear from the text that Gudrun favored her first husband, Sigurd. Therefore, Gudrun cherishes their daughter, Svanhild, more than her other children from her subsequent husbands. Gudrun states: "she [Svanhild] it was I loved best of all my bairns."<sup>63</sup> Gudrun even incites her three sons, by her third husband, to avenge Svanhild's murder, even though both Gudrun and her sons know that the mission will end in death.<sup>64</sup> This is an

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<sup>62</sup> Gudrun and Atli's narrative is told in two books in the *Elder Edda*: *Atlakvida* and *Atlamál in grœnlenzku*. *Atlamál in grœnlenzku* is a more detailed and clear version of the story.

<sup>63</sup> *Elder Edda*, pp. 233.

<sup>64</sup> *Volsungs*, pp. 107-108.



important connection to make because Gudrun never felt any connection to Atli, her second husband, she does not appear to have much connection with their children.

Like Siggeir, once Atli breaks the peace agreement created through marriage, Gudrun completely removes herself from the identity of Atli's wife and mother of his children. After Atli kills Gudrun's brothers, Gudrun plots her revenge and kills her two sons. Gudrun wants compensation for the death of her brothers, but refuses material payment:

Atli replied: "We two should now make our peace. I will recompense you for the death of your brothers with gold and precious gifts, according to your desire."  
"For a long time I have not been easy to deal with," said she, "but I could tolerate matters while Hogni lived. You will never pay for my brothers to my satisfaction. Yet we women are often forced to bow to your strength. My kinsmen are now all dead and you alone have control over me."<sup>65</sup>

Because Gudrun will not be satisfied with a monetary retribution for the deaths of her brothers, she turns to murder. Though she tells Atli that he has control over her, that is far from the truth.

Like Signy, in order to achieve true revenge against a man, one must kill his heirs to ensure that he will not be avenged. So, Gudrun takes her two sons and kills them, but in both the *Atlamál in grænlensku* and the *Saga of the Volsungs*, her sons speak to their mother, knowing that they are about to die. In *Atlamál in grænlensku* the sons state: "Sacrifice, if you will, your children, no one will stop you; / a rest from anger will be

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 103.

brief, if you bring this about.”<sup>66</sup> And in the *Volsungs*: “‘You may do with your children as you like,’ said the boys. ‘No one will hinder you, but there will be shame for you in this act.’”<sup>67</sup> The thread that connects these two statements is that Gudrun appears to have the right to kill her children—her sons even concede that point. This shows a different attitude regarding filicide from the English. The one who had the right to sacrifice or kill their children was only the father. But, in the Norse narrative, the mother also has that agency over her children. This shows a distinct difference between the gender roles of the two societies.

After Gudrun kills her sons and her husband she, like Signy, attempts to kill herself by drowning. However, Gudrun does not die, and the sea carries her to another land where her story continues. Narratively speaking, Signy and Gudrun are very similar, the main difference being that Signy does not physically kill her children, but Gudrun does. Gudrun also survives at the end of her story. I argue that Gudrun survives because she kills her sons herself rather than employing whetting. The Norse religion praises warriors and violence is prevalent in the Norse mythos. The fact that Gudrun lives demonstrates two things: the first being that revenge is not all that defines Gudrun and the second, she is not viewed negatively after she commits filicide. Some scholars view Signy as solely connected to the revenge trope, so when the revenge is over, she is removed from the narrative. Since Gudrun’s narrative continues after her revenge is complete, we can assert that Gudrun’s narrative function goes beyond her role as an

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<sup>66</sup> *Elder Edda*, pp. 226.

<sup>67</sup> *Volsungs*, pp. 104.

avenger. Further, while other characters, such as Atli and Gudrun's second set of sons, chastise Gudrun for the murder of her and Atli's sons, she is never described as an evil character, unlike the sultanness for example. An argument can be made that the public reading and hearing the stories of Gudrun would not have viewed her actions as villainous either.

Gudrun, as Jochens notes was an extremely popular character. The name Gudrun appears in different texts for a variety of different characters and was also a popular name for ordinary people as well. "More than 10 percent of the entire population carried the name in 1703, according to the first Icelandic census, and today it remains the most common female name in modern Iceland."<sup>68</sup> Jochens speculates that the reason that Gudrun was so popular was because of her loyalty to her natal family: "Gudrun [...] is admired for her more violent acts because she performs them on behalf of the men in her native family."<sup>69</sup> What this popularity tells us is that the people were not revolted by Gudrun's act of filicide, but admired for her loyalty to her brothers. But, Signy, who shows just as much loyalty to her blood family is not afforded the same popularity. She does not perform the violence herself and is never seen participating in violence, unlike Gudrun who fights alongside her brothers and avenges their deaths by killing her children and her husband. This shows the acceptance of women performing violence, even against their children, which is made possible because of the culture and religion that surrounds the Norse culture.

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<sup>68</sup> Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, pp. 26.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 28.

The complexities informing medieval motherhood are vast and at times difficult to navigate. The identity of mother was informed by one's culture and, more specifically, religion. Observing medieval images of motherhood from both the English and the Norse provides us with vastly different aspects of the maternal. These women experienced different anxieties, held different parental rights, and were expected to act or perform in different ways. However, both the English and Norse societies are patriarchal and motherhood is just another facet of the male driven culture. Mothers were secondary to fathers, who had more rights to their children. But, there are literary examples of mothers stripping away their maternal identity by killing their children. These acts deserve analysis because we see motherhood operating as a secondary aspect in these women's lives. The sultanness' primary concern is with her religion and she sacrifices her son in order to appease her god. Tristram's step-mother accidentally kills her son during her quest to claim the succession of the throne for her own familial line. The two Norsewomen, Signy and Gudrun, place avenging their natal family above their children. These women place value on something so far above their own children that they are willing to kill them for their cause.

While all four of these women perform similar acts, their reception is vastly different. In the English narratives the women are viewed as evil and wicked for their deeds. The sultanness is killed and the step-mother faces being burned at the stake for her attempt at usurping before Tristram steps in and saves her life. However, in the Norse tales, these women are viewed as heroines and strong characters. While the killing of their children is not praised, the lengths that they were willing to go in order to avenge

their brothers is commended in the medieval Norse society. Gudrun, arguably is most violent woman in this study, was a very popular character in medieval Iceland. This popularity demonstrates that the Norse saw women as more than just mothers and did not ostracize women who subordinated motherhood.

Indeed, even in a case as drastic as filicide, the Norse narratives offer a more accepting depiction of women performing violence. Perhaps this is because the murders that take place actually conform to the Nordic societal norms of revenge and killing, though those roles are normally held by men. Murder and revenge killings were prevalent in Norse narratives. This societal difference is why women who operate outside of the masculine hegemony in Norse texts are not viewed as villains. These women are not removed from the narrative (either killed or written out) by men, unlike the women in English texts. Though Signy takes her own life, her actions are her own and not informed by men. The main reason that Norse women are freed from the villainous identity of murderous mothers is because they are free from the constraints that Christianity places on women. In the Norse tradition we see images of females who are praised for taking on the masculine act of avenging, a role that they place above motherhood. In contrast Englishwomen who place another role over motherhood are condemned. By engaging with mothers who commit filicide, we are able to also analyze a culture's understanding of gender, navigate the complexities of motherhood, and the implications of religion.

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